

# Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Advent

*Gustaf Wingren*

Luke 1:39–45 · 1974

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*Preached on the Annunciation, 24 March 1974*

*Stora Råby Church, Lund (broadcast live on Swedish Radio)*

*Text: Luke 1:39–45*

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We begin as usual in history, in the long-ago past — but this time not in biblical history. We begin in the history of our holy days. Christmas Day, the birthday of Jesus, had been placed on 25 December since the fourth century. When, around the year 500, a date was to be chosen for celebrating the birth of John the Baptist, the gospel text for today served as a guide, especially verses 26 and 36 of Luke 1, which we just heard from the altar. When Elizabeth, John's mother, was "in the sixth month," she was visited by the young Mary, the mother of Jesus, who had only just become pregnant. John the Baptist is thus six months older. That leads to 24 June, Midsummer Day, or "John the Baptist's Day," "Sankt Hans," as it is called in Denmark. Both days were old sun festivals. At midsummer the sun stands highest; at Christmas it turns. That is how the church generally behaved. It took pagan festivals and gave them a Christian content. It sounds a little uneven, 25 December and 24 June, but it is the same date number. In those days the days were counted not from the beginning of the month but from the end. Since December has thirty-one days and June only thirty, the seventh day from the end is 25 December and 24 June. We still do the same with the clock today. In everyday speech we say "seven minutes to five," not 4:53.

Let us now begin our sermon by thinking for a while about our midsummers and our Christmases through the centuries in Europe — about all the children, and especially all the girls, who ran in the meadows picking flowers at midsummer and who waited for Christmas Eve in the winter darkness.

Girls' names that are loved usually get many variants. Mary and Elizabeth are well-liked names, and in all the modern languages they have a great many forms. Most solemn is Maria — but then there are Mia and Maj and Maja and Mary and Marie and Marianne, and other

combinations without end, and besides these the real Jewish Miriam. All of them have their root in the young Mary, who on this day, filled with the adventure she faced, hurried up to her kinswoman, the older Elizabeth, who had been childless for many years. In Elizabeth one could already see what was to happen in three months. In Mary nothing could be noticed, only expectation. Elizabeth is a longer word. There one can build on different syllables. There is Lisbeth and Lisa, but there are also Betsy and Bettan and Bet, and in addition Elsa and Elsy — one cannot list them all.

Today we stand before the first mothers of all these girls' names in our history: the meeting between the first Mary and the first Elizabeth up in the hill country of Judah, today's preaching text from the first chapter of Luke.

None of the stories about Jesus' childhood wants to describe how he develops. All these texts tell how a king begins to reign. The wise men, and Anna and Simeon in the temple, are people who bow before a prince — a child, to be sure, but a child who has "all power." That is true of today's text too. The evangelist sees it all with the resurrection on the third day as his vantage point. The older woman, Elizabeth, reverently calls the young Mary "the mother of my Lord," that is, the mother of Jesus Christ, who is the Lord. All these stories in Luke are late. Mark, the earliest gospel, has nothing to report about Jesus' childhood. Paul, who writes before all the others, is wholly filled with the wonder of the resurrection. Of Jesus' birth he says only, "... born of a woman, born under the law" (Galatians 4:4). The missionary preaching, as it is given in the Acts of the Apostles and in the letters, always contains — as its center — a message about Christ crucified and risen, and never a statement that he was born of a virgin. But in the creed this latter statement has found its place. It has its weight without being central to faith, and probably without even being known to all those who first let themselves be baptized in the turmoil after Pentecost. The resurrection, on the other hand, was proclaimed as the wonder above all wonders.

The heart of these stories about Jesus' birth and childhood is not the physical miracle. The heart is the willingness of the human instruments to hand over their short earthly life to become something that God may put to use. "Here I am, God. Do with me as you will." That is the point throughout. And on this day we should think especially that this concerns the women in God's history with humanity, the mothers of the main characters. The willingness to bear and care for a child — that was the natural, everyday tool God used to carry out his work with all that is called human.

Let us return for a moment to all these girls at midsummer and at Christmas, century after century, and to one single point: the joy in their faces and in their eyes. Here, in the hill country of Judah, joy dawned when the child in the body of the one leaped for joy at the greeting of the other. What kind of future was it that they rejoiced in? Elizabeth carried in her body a boy whose life would end by beheading, because a dancer at a feast asked for his head on a platter and got what she wanted. Inside Mary another boy child had just begun to come into being, whose life would end by crucifixion — which was generally thought to be worse than beheading. That is the future of the boys in the wombs of the two women. When they meet, the one leaps for joy at meeting the other. For the human life that hands itself over into God's hand and lets God use it for whatever he wills — that human life feels joy at what happens. There is no longer anything that is defeat. The church of Christ exists in humanity in order to spread in the world such a joy, one that holds in life and in death, and in order to spread such strength to endure. This is her task. It is the task of the gospel, the message of joy.

During 1974 a great world gathering of young people from all the races and peoples of humanity will be held at Taizé in the south of France. It begins on 30 August. Thousands upon thousands of young people will come there from every part of the world. The gathering has been prepared over several years. I personally believe it is among the most important things happening in the church history of our time. Certain simple basic thoughts have kept returning during the preparations. One of them is the conviction that the resurrection from the dead is the most important thing in the gospel. Another is the conviction that joy is the Christian congregation's greatest wealth, the gift the congregation is to hold out to the world — not judgment, not norms in the first place, but joy, precisely the joy that lies in the resurrection of the dead and that cannot be broken by anything that happens: not by beheading, not by crucifixion, not by a third world war. Resurrection is victory over death in all its forms.

These tens of thousands of young people cannot gather in a church building. They walk singing in the open country, celebrate Holy Communion in the open country, and want to show the world the joy of the Christian faith. The meeting between Mary and Elizabeth in the hill country of Judah, the zest for life in their bodies in the face of a future of darkness for both their boy children — I hardly know any text that makes the directly sensuous joy of the gospel so vivid as this very story, today's preaching text.

It is fitting to hold together all that we now hold together in today's High Mass: death in its most shameful form, waiting for the two boy children, Jesus and the Baptist; the glad movement of the unborn child in the womb; the smiling defiance of all that is to happen; and then all these girls, all these sparkling eyes and merry laughs from Midsummer Eves and Christmas Eves, generation after generation, all through the history of Europe.

Two points are equally important, two points that belong together.

First: When God creates something new, he takes as his instrument the human zest for life, the ordinary, simple will to bear and care for life. He uses this human courage for life in his service for the salvation of all.

Second: All human zest for life comes up against its limit in death and despairs at that limit. Only the message of the resurrection from death gives humanity strength to endure the darkness that relentlessly descends upon us all.

[Note in *Postilla*: The sermon was preached on 24 March 1974 (the Annunciation) in Stora Råby Church, Lund. The service was broadcast live on Swedish Radio. The sermon is published in the booklet *Maria. Ett ord om människovård. Tre radiopredikningar* (*Mary: A Word on Caring for People. Three Radio Sermons*), 1974, an offprint from the journal *IM*. There the sermon has the heading "To Care for What Is Created — and Rejoice in It."]

*Translator's notes.* The source is the printed text in *Postilla* (2010), which places the sermon under the Fourth Sunday in Advent; the editor's footnote, translated in brackets at the end, says it was preached on the Annunciation, 24 March 1974, and we have kept both in the heading. Swedish "Jungfru Marie bebådelsedag" is rendered "the Annunciation." The lists of girls' names are left in their Swedish and other forms. The Danish "Sankt Hans" is kept. "Livslust" is rendered "zest for life" and "livsmod" "courage for life," to keep the two words apart as Wingren does.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·

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#### SOURCE

From *Postilla: Gustaf Wingren predikar* (Artos, 2010), pp. 31–34